

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony regarding the structure of the NYS Foundation Aid formula. My name is Clifford Kasson, Superintendent of Schools, Vestal Central School District, Vestal, NY. I have lived in the Vestal school community for 28 years. I began employment within the district in 2006 as a building administrator and have enjoyed working tirelessly on behalf of our students, faculty/staff, and wonderful school community. In addition to being employed at Vestal CSD, all three of my children attended Vestal CSD from kindergarten through grade 12. During their time at Vestal CSD, each of my three daughters were provided an environment in which to learn from teachers who had many opportunities for professional development provided by the district. Our inquiry-based K-8th grade education proved to be the springboard for success during their high school years. Our well-trained faculty challenged my children in rigorous Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Project Lead the Way, Fast Forward, and other college prep programs that exceeded NYS standards. This educational approach to providing students with high rigor academic programs ensured that my daughters surpassed the requirements for college readiness. Each of my three children have stated their Vestal Central School District education provided them with foundational knowledge that translated into academic success with on-time graduation from three acclaimed higher educational institutions. The three colleges/universities are Penn State - Biomedical Engineering, Baruch College - Zicklin School of Business, and the Nazareth University - Nursing program.

Vestal Central School District is not considered a district of need, as the population qualifying for poverty status is at approximately 25%. Thus, Vestal CSD's 3,400+ student population is not eligible for most grants or additional funding through Foundation Aid. On the contrary, there are school districts in our area that have annual budgets exceeding Vestal's budget by \$12 million with only 100 more students enrolled. The perception is that high-achieving districts such as Vestal CSD (ranked # 1 in our region and #190 in NYS by the September 2024 US News and World Report Best High Schools) with lower poverty rates do not require additional funding to maintain and grow student opportunities that support social, emotional, and academic success beyond their high school years.

The Vestal CSD community is very supportive of our school system. Over time, as student mental health and emotional needs increased, additional social workers, counselors, and support service positions increased, creating an additional expense for the district. This coupled with increased programming costs for students with disabilities, and an ever-increasing population of ESL students, our local taxpayer share is not able to provide funding to sustain these additional services. However, other districts with higher poverty needs benefit from qualifying for a large number of grants and additional funding to promote programs for students. During preparation for the last budget cycle (2024-25), we were forced to reduce staffing for elementary reading services and secondary teachers. These budget cuts were directly related to hold-harmless of Foundation Aid and increased labor costs due to the drastic increase in minimum wage.

With the increase to minimum wage in NYS, Vestal CSD was forced to increase salaries of all non-instructional employees. With approximately 650 employees in our district, 50% are teachers/building administrators/related services, while the remaining workers are food service, maintenance/custodial, transportation, paraprofessionals, and clerical. When combined with the increased cost for professional services (such as HVAC, etc.) and materials/supplies/equipment, as well as a maximum allowable levy increase of 1.77% coupled with no increase in Foundation Aid, the District was forced to reduce programming at the middle and high school levels while laying off

individuals. The fiscal forecast is even worse for the 2025-26 school year. This will require the District to continue trimming and eliminating high level programs at the high school that prepare students for college and university. This will be a very difficult time for our school and school community. Our school district, students, and overall school community are continuously penalized financially because we are not experiencing an increase of families meeting poverty requirements. This blatant practice of overfunding for school districts in poverty at the expense of other school districts is disproportionate. As mentioned above, a district two miles away with greater poverty needs than Vestal CSD qualifies for grant and special funding where Vestal CSD does not. Furthermore, that school district's overall budget is approximately \$12,000,000 higher than Vestal's overall annual budget with approximately 100 more students enrolled K-12. Of their overall budget, this other district receives approximately \$38,000,000 in Foundation Aid, while Vestal CSD receives approximately \$20,000,000. This is a drastic difference that negatively impacts the Vestal CSD community and student learning.

I am requesting that the Rockefeller Commission take a serious look at the current Foundation Aid formula and how it negatively impacts districts that work tirelessly to support **ALL** students. Our district has high graduation rates for **ALL** students, including our English as a Second Language students and Students with Disabilities (ESL and SWD). We dedicate our educational practice to whole learning for students, and all of our curricula meet and exceed NYS standards. This dedication and approach to academic rigor in a caring learning environment, while also focusing on social and emotional learning combined with high expectations for student success and achievement, is the cornerstone of our school district. Our school community is committed to this excellence in education as evidenced by our 3-8 NYS assessment scores, graduation rates, AP/IB assessment scores, college/university acceptance rates, and higher-level education completion rates. Our commitment to educating each and every student who enrolls in our district to the best of our ability is being eroded due to a lack of state funding.

There are a few very important points that I feel could help make the Foundation Aid formula much clearer and more equitable in providing funding for all districts, not just districts that may have higher poverty.

We all know that the poverty data is coming from the 2000 census, which is seriously outdated, and there are known issues with other poverty reporting types. I feel that this could be the first area that is looked at; by using a newer census and by giving Districts the tools to gather local information by allowing Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL) forms as a yearly requirement for our families. What is especially concerning is that the current poverty data is a mix of the census and FRPL counts. Is there a plan to address this now that most every school qualifies for free lunch and FRPL forms? Since Vestal CSD meets the requirements for FRPL, more of our families are refusing to complete the FRPL forms.

Like many districts, Vestal CSD has seen an increase in English Language Learners. I am requesting ELL counts be treated similarly to the weighting system for Special Education student counts. This would support districts that have a large number of ELL students, as it is more in line with how much it actually costs to educate these unique learners.

With the Regional Cost Index, the state is currently broken into 9 regions and, again, is a relatively older piece of the Foundation Aid puzzle dating back to 2006. Perhaps splitting into smaller regions

or applying a cost index per county would be a more accurate representation of the needs in all corners of the state.

Within the Foundation Aid formula, there are certain weights that allow for additional funding based on a variety of factors such as Special Education, poverty, etc. I propose that there should be an additional weight that gives further funding to high-achieving schools like Vestal so that we are better able to sustain these programs which have supported our students in preparing them for the world after K-12 public education.

While I am aware of the financial constraints of a budget, I urge NYS to look at the entire picture. We cannot expect money to appear and solve all these problems. Part of why we are in this dire financial situation is because NYS is quickly becoming too expensive to live in and people are leaving the state. While we must all work within a budget, I believe that there should be further structured oversight into the use and funding of reserves. I do not believe that most districts are holding onto unnecessary funds, but we do know that there have been instances of districts funding beyond a reasonable amount in some reserves. This factors into Vestal CSD's budget because we follow the 4% rule for unassigned fund balance. Thus, Vestal has less funds to work with while educating students at a high level.

Thank you for the opportunity to express our concerns with the current Foundation Aid formula and offer suggestions that would positively impact NYS schools, including schools similar to Vestal CSD.